

STORY BY RANDY ROUGHTON ✦ PHOTOS BY TECH. SGT. BENNIE J. DAVIS III

# MASTER OF THE SKY

## 'HE WAS GOING FASTER THAN ANY MAN IN HISTORY'

**T**he West Virginia teenager wasn't impressed by his first close-up look at an airplane after it made an emergency landing near his house. Heck, it was 1930 and he didn't even know what a pilot was. The 16-year-old, who was keen on hunting squirrels, could not have dreamed he would become a history-making hunter in the sky any more than he could have foreseen he would earn the right to be called the fastest man alive.

And today, retired Brig. Gen. Chuck Yeager keeps no pilot's helmet, flight suit or any other memorabilia from his six decades in cockpits. The souvenirs from his achievements are primarily his memories.

"Obviously, there are a few photos you hang on to," he says. "But, to me, a piece of GI equipment belongs to Uncle Sam. It doesn't belong to you. You have to take care of it until you wear it out, trade it in and get a new one."

Others have a different view of Yeager memorabilia; such as the owners of Riebes Auto Parts store in Grass Valley, Calif., a town of about 12,000 people where General Yeager now lives with wife Victoria. The store, owned by a family friend in the town 50 miles north of Sacramento, boasts a Yeager

Room with photos adorning the walls and depicting major milestones in the aviation legend's career. This small town in the Sierra foothills is one of northern California's most famous gold rush towns and serves as an appropriate retirement location for a man who has enjoyed the outdoors since childhood.

Grass Valley residents have become accustomed to seeing the Yeagers' car around town with the X-1 personalized license plate.

The Air Force is honoring the general, this time as the inaugural aviation hero featured in a new Air Force Public Affairs portrait project that showcases veterans and their contributions to the Air Force. "Pioneers in Blue" features Airmen from the Army Air Corps in World War I through the present in a photo gallery at the Pentagon. His photo, the first to be unveiled, went on display Sept. 18 in conjunction with the Air Force birthday celebration.

But the most vivid snapshots are in his mind, which even after 87 years, remains a virtual museum of memories from when he became "master of the sky." With a disclaimer not to trust his memory because "it has been more than 60 years," the general recounts details — from his 13 kills as a World War II fighter pilot to his own downing over Nazi-occupied France. He eventually comes to the part of becoming the first pilot

to break the sound barrier on Oct. 14, 1947, only 26 days after the Air Force became a separate service.

Some of his accomplishments attracted more publicity than others, but to General Yeager, everything he did in a career that spanned four wars and more than 18,000 flying hours in 341 types of aircraft can be summarized in one word: "Duty. Everything I did was for duty. There are lots of Airmen in the Air Force who do different kinds of duty. I was just involved in the leading

edge of research of supersonic flight and in the development of weapons systems in modern airplanes."

### BACKWOODS BOY

The general developed his prowess as a hunter as a boy in the Appalachian foothills. He says he learned the art of "deflection shooting," or leading prey and aiming for where it will be when he fires his weapon.

"That is exactly what you have to do when you're dog-fighting in airplanes," General Yeager says. "All of the leading aces of fighter pilots were raised as rural kids. You have to know what the target is going to do."

But, his West Virginia childhood didn't exactly prepare him for flying. General Yeager joined the Army Air Corps at the age of 18 as an aircraft mechanic and was transferred to Victorville [Calif.] Air Base after Pearl Harbor and worked on AT-11 Kansan aircraft. He was accepted for pilot training under the flying sergeant program in July 1942, but became nauseous the first time he flew in a C-45 Expeditor two months after beginning training.

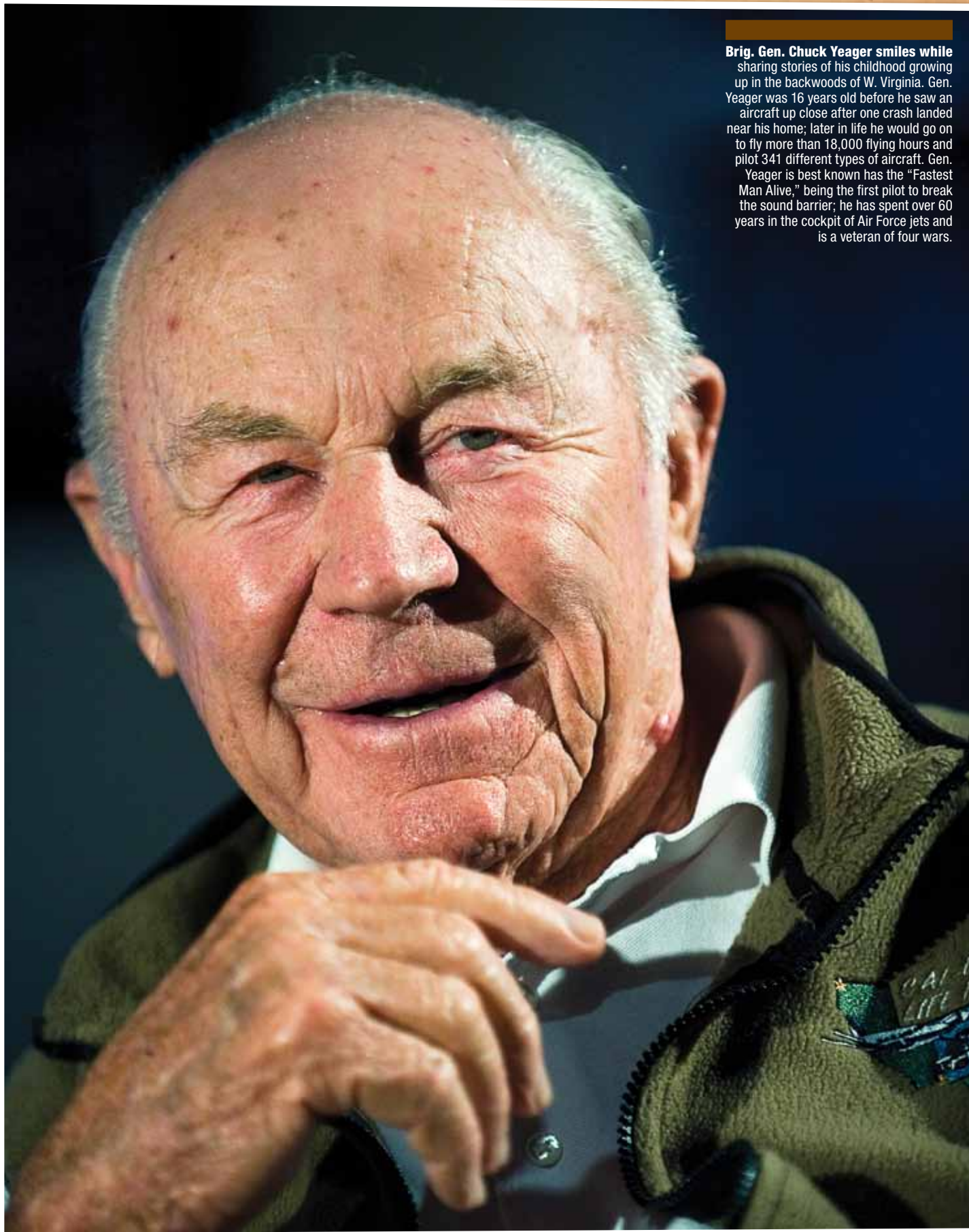
"I thought to myself, 'You've made one big mistake,'" General Yeager says with a laugh. "But when I got into flying school, I had something to do instead of just riding in the airplane and it got a little better."



U.S. Air Force file photo from 1947

**Then-Capt. Chuck Yeager poses next to the X-1 he piloted on Oct. 14, 1947, after he broke the sound barrier. He nicknamed the plane "Glamorous Glennis" after his first wife, who died in 1990.**





**Brig. Gen. Chuck Yeager smiles while** sharing stories of his childhood growing up in the backwoods of W. Virginia. Gen. Yeager was 16 years old before he saw an aircraft up close after one crash landed near his home; later in life he would go on to fly more than 18,000 flying hours and pilot 341 different types of aircraft. Gen.

Yeager is best known as the "Fastest Man Alive," being the first pilot to break the sound barrier; he has spent over 60 years in the cockpit of Air Force jets and is a veteran of four wars.



After completing pilot training in March 1943, General Yeager was selected as a P-39 Airacobra pilot with the 363rd Fighter Squadron in Tonopah, Nev., for one important reason.

"I could dogfight better than some of the other guys could," he explains matter-of-factly.

The young flyer didn't have to wait long to get his first taste of combat after arriving in England in November 1943. On March 4, 1944, American bombers took off for Berlin but were recalled, except for the group that included Yeager's P-51 Mustang. He saw his first German ME-109, shot it down, and learned a lesson that would serve him well in the many combat kills that came later.

"I learned, really quickly, never to shoot at an airplane from directly behind it," he says. "Big pieces of wing and tail will come back and they'll take you right out of the sky if they hit you."

One day after his first aerial kill, his luck turned when three German Focke-Wulf FW-190s shot him down and he bailed out over occupied France. Bleeding and injured and armed only with a .45-caliber pistol, he landed about 50 miles east of Bordeaux. German soldiers searched for him in the forest. They didn't

have a chance.

"It was easy for me," General Yeager says. "There's not a German in the world who can catch a West Virginian in the woods. That's just the way it is."

The next morning, General Yeager met a French woodcutter, who brought back a member of the Maquis, the French resistance group who hid the young Airman in a barn while the Germans continued their search. General Yeager stayed with the Maquis near Nerac, a town in southwestern France, for several months and he later set fuses for their bombs, another skill honed in his childhood when he would help set explosives for his father's natural gas well drilling business.

The French eventually helped General Yeager escape to Spain through the Pyrenees Mountains.

"Lots of guys owed their lives to the French," he said. "I know I do, and they were wonderful, wonderful people."

The United States offered Spain, a neutral nation during World War II, gasoline in exchange for the parole of American pilots like General Yeager. More than 2,500 American pilots were interned in Spain until they were taken to the British at Gibraltar. He

went back to England on May 15, 1944, but faced an early trip home from the war because of a policy that prevented pilots from returning to combat after being shot down to protect the lives of people like the French resistance group who protected him from the Germans.

But, he wasn't ready to go home. The pilot talked to a string of colonels in his chain of command until eventually he ended up in the office of Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower, the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe.

"He told me, 'I normally don't see guys like you, but I just wanted to meet a guy who didn't want to go home,'" General Yeager says. "He said, 'We've got guys shooting themselves in the foot to go home. Why don't you want to go home?' I just said I hadn't done my job.

"I've done five missions and I'm trained. I've got more fighting left to do," he said he told General Eisenhower. "He said he couldn't give me permission to go back, but he'd take it up with the Department of Defense. What he knew, and didn't tell me, was that was eight days before D-Day. Once D-Day surfaced, all of the free French resistance groups became an open army, so there was no longer any reason to

keep me out of combat."

## MOVING INTO HIGH SPEED

By the end of the war, General Yeager had flown 64 combat missions and shot down 13 enemy aircraft. He was the first American pilot to down five aircraft in one mission, or to make "ace in a day."

After World War II, he served as a test pilot at Wright Field, Ohio, before he was selected as the Bell X-1 project officer for high-speed flight research at Muroc Air Base, Calif., which became Edwards AFB two years later. Quonset huts, sagebrush and Joshua trees shared the Muroc landscape with Rogers Dry Lake, a flat expanse covered with a couple of inches of water in the winter and dried out in the spring.

The British had already tried to break the sound barrier but test pilot Geoffrey de Havilland was killed in an attempt to reach Mach 1 in a British Meteor jet.

"When I was assigned to the X-1, I gave no thought to the outcome of whether the airplane would blow up or something would happen to me," General Yeager says. "If you have no control over the outcome of something, you forget about it. I learned that in combat. In our squadron of 29 pilots, 23 of them got killed. It was a lethal job. 'You've got a mission to fly,

**Brig. Gen. Chuck Yeager talks about** his historical flight becoming the first pilot to break the sound barrier, flying at Mach 1 at an altitude of 45,000 feet inside the Bell X-1 jet-powered research plane on October 14, 1947. At the time many scientist believed the sound barrier could crush an aircraft, yet Gen. Yeager stepped forward and accepted the challenge to become the "Fastest Man Alive."

**Brig. Gen. Chuck Yeager holds his** favorite lithograph depicting images of his life and career as an Air Force pilot inside the "Yeager Room" at the Riebes Auto Parts store, owned by a family friend, near his home in Grass Valley, Calif. Gen. Yeager was the first pilot to break the sound barrier on October 14, 1947, while flying the experimental X-1 at speeds exceeding Mach 1.







so you fly. It wasn't my job to think about that. It was my job to do the flying."

On Oct. 14, 1947, then Captain Yeager piloted the X-1, an experimental aircraft designed like a .50-caliber bullet because bullets were believed to be stable at supersonic speeds, at 45,000 feet with the goal of achieving Mach .97, almost 20 mph slower than the speed of sound. The X-1 bore the inscription "Glamorous Glennis" in honor of his first wife, Glennis. Two days earlier, he'd broken two ribs while horseback riding in the Mojave Desert. To avoid being scrubbed from the mission, he told only his friend and flight test engineer, Dr. Jack Ridley, who thought of the idea of using a 10-inch piece of broomstick to help him raise the X-1's door.

The X-1 dropped from a B-29 Superfortress at 25,000 feet to save fuel because the

liquid-powered airplane only had 2½ minutes of power under full thrust. Once he reached Mach .93, the X-1 developed heavy buffeting and shaking, so he accelerated to Mach .96. The turmoil immediately stopped.

"We were a little surprised we got above Mach 1 without the little airplane flying apart," General Yeager said. "We were sitting there at nearly supersonic speed and the airplane was smoothing out. No other airplane had ever been there."

"It was as smooth as a baby's bottom," General Yeager was quoted afterward. "Grandma could be sitting up there sipping lemonade."

Celebration at Muroc was somewhat muted because the X-1 was only one of 10 airplanes General Yeager was testing at the time. The news of breaking the sound barrier remained top secret until Aviation Week

magazine broke the story two months later. Air Force Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Hoyt Vandenberg didn't confirm this achievement until June 1948. A Newsweek magazine story proclaimed the general "the fastest man alive."

"Obviously, the most important thing I did was the success we had with the X-1," he said. "When we got above Mach 1, what did that do? It opened up space and everything else for us."

General Yeager also became the first pilot to fly at more than twice the speed of sound in the Bell X-1A on Dec. 12, 1953, and was the first American to fly a Soviet MiG-15 after a North Korean pilot defected to South Korea with the plane.

After General Yeager retired in 1975, he served the Air Force as a consultant test pilot at Edwards AFB for an annual salary of \$1.

#### **A master of the sky even at 87 years**

old, Brig. Gen. retired Chuck Yeager, stands in front of Aviat Husky aircraft which he still flies and teaches flight lessons near his home in Grass Valley, Calif. Gen. Yeager is an aviation legend with the U.S. Air Force after becoming the first pilot to fly faster than the speed of sound, breaking the sound barrier on Oct. 14, 1947, only 26 days after the Air Force became a separate service.

"I thought it was great," he says. "It meant I could fly all of the new airplanes and work on the development of new weapons systems. I spent a lot of time down there, and it gave me something to do after my wife Glennis died in 1990."

General Yeager made his last flight as a military consultant on Oct. 14, 1997, the 50th anniversary of his history-making flight in the X-1. He again observed the occasion by once again breaking the sound barrier, this time in an F-15.